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Popular Culture, Gender, and Revolution in Egypt¹

Nicola Pratt, University of Warwick, n.c.pratt@warwick.ac.uk

Popular culture, particularly its gendered dimensions, remains relatively understudied in the field of Middle East Studies, including Middle East Gender Studies. Yet it provides a fruitful arena for understanding the construction and reproduction of dominant gender norms, as well as their contestation and subversion. This was especially apparent in the wake of the Arab uprisings, when different forms of creative expression—such as graffiti and independent music—flourished, and popular media openly addressed previously taboo issues, namely the phenomenon of sexual violence. Ostensibly a field of entertainment, popular culture creates possibilities to reach new audiences in ways that more institutionalized feminist activism, such as lobbying for legal reforms, may struggle to do. These issues, among others, are the focus of *Politics and Popular Culture in Egypt: Contested Narratives of the 25 January 2011 Revolution and its Aftermath*, a three-and-a-half-year project that, between June 2016 and January 2020, explored popular culture in Egypt in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising.² The project resulted in the creation of an online archive, alongside other academic writings.³

The definition of popular culture has long been debated and contested in the field of cultural studies. In everyday language, it is implicitly defined in relation to what it is not, such as “high” culture or “folk” culture. The boundaries between “high” and “low,” contemporary and folk, among others, are not static over time, nor are they universal. This was apparent during the Egyptian revolution, when the boundaries between different cultural and artistic styles were challenged through the creative and political practices of those protesting on the streets. For example, during the 18 days of the Tahrir Square sit-in (January-February 2011), the folk music of Port Said, the early-twentieth-century repertoire of Sayyid Darwish, and the rock music of Ramy Essam all played a part in unifying the people and expressing their desires for social justice and freedom from oppression (Swedenburg 2012).

The meaning of “the popular” should be seen as contingent and context-specific, linked to wider political struggles. In this respect, it is useful to draw on the work of the late sociologist and cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall, who argued that the definition of “the popular” is inextricably linked to the defining of “the people,” who in one moment may be constructed as a “force against the power bloc” and in a different moment may be equally constructed as a “populist force saying ‘Yes’ to power” (1981: 239). In the Egyptian revolution, the famous slogan “The people want the fall of the regime” clearly situated the people against the power bloc. However, just over two years later, “the people” were those who sided with the army

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² The project was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grant no. AH/N004353/1. For more details, see

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/researchcentres/cpd/popularcultureegypt/>

³ The project archive can be found at: <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/> For a list of some of the academic writings arising from the project, see:

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/researchcentres/cpd/popularcultureegypt/>

against the Muslim Brotherhood. Crucially, the construction of “the people” and “the popular” involves defining “who does—and does not—get to count as a person, as a citizen, as someone who belongs, as someone whose life matters, as someone worthy of the state’s protection and of society’s favour” (Rodman 2016: 395). For Hall, popular culture is an important arena where these struggles occur over meaning (Hall 1981: 239).

Despite women’s substantial involvement in the 25 January uprising and the 18-day sit-in, once Mubarak stepped down they were soon confronted with threats to their rights, including their right to be part of the political transition. In this context, popular culture became an arena in which activists and artists battled to ensure that any definition of “the people” would include Egypt’s women. Hence, popular culture was an important medium through which dominant gender norms were contested. We can identify three ways in which popular culture was used to shed light onto women’s perspectives and raise their concerns in relation to the 2011 uprising and its tumultuous aftermath: narrating women’s stories; reimagining gender identities and norms; and as a tool of feminist advocacy, particularly to combat sexual violence.

Narrating Women’s Stories

While many women artists and writers in Egypt have long sought to present women’s experiences,⁴ since 2011 there has been a significant growth and interest in telling women’s stories in relation to the uprising but also more broadly. The critically acclaimed feature documentary *Athar al-Farasha (The Trace of the Butterfly)*, 2014,⁵ directed by Amal Ramsis, offers an intimate account of the 25 January revolution, in contrast to many of the documentaries released after 2011, which focus primarily on street protests and/or the political process. The film is based on the story of Mary Danial, the sister of Mena Danial, who was killed in the Maspero Massacre in October 2011.⁶ Over a two-year period, the director follows Mary’s journey through the Egyptian revolution with all its ups and downs of triumph, despair, and loss. Through Mary, the film highlights the personal significance of the revolution for its participants. Forcibly married to a man 17 years her senior, Mary left her husband coincidentally on the same day of the Maspero massacre. That evening she was the first to publicly accuse the army of killing her brother and the other protesters (Albawaba 2015). Mary’s resistance against different forms of male authority suggests the ways in which participation in the revolution reshaped subjectivities and provided opportunities to challenge dominant gender norms.

⁴ There are many examples of Egyptian women writers and filmmakers. Some of the most prominent include playwright and activist Fathiyya al-`Assal (1933-2014) and documentary filmmakers Ateyyat Al-Abnoudi (1939-2018) and Tahani Rached (1947-). Al-`Assal began writing plays in the late 1960s and also wrote TV drama series and novels. She was well known for addressing issues of women’s rights and women’s oppression in her writings. She was also a former chair of the Egyptian Female Writers’ Association and the Progressive Women’s Union, affiliated with the Tagammu’ party (Ashour et al. 2008: 359). Al-Abnoudi is considered one of the pioneers of female filmmaking in the Arab world. Her films are known for dealing with political, social, and economic issues. Rached is best known for the 1997 feature documentary *Four Women of Egypt*. For further details on Al-Abnoudi and Rached, see Hillauer 2005.

⁵ See Amal Ramsis, “The Trace of the Butterfly,” *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/28>

⁶ The Maspero massacre was the killing of mainly Coptic protesters by the army outside the Egyptian TV and broadcasting building at Maspero, on 9 October 2011.

Meanwhile, Hala Khalil's feature film *Nawara* (2015), set against the backdrop of events in 2011, is more pessimistic about the meaning of the revolution for the most economically and socially excluded Egyptians.⁷ *Nawara*, the very likeable protagonist, is a young, working-class woman living in a low-income neighborhood of Cairo. She works as a maid for a wealthy family, who lives in a luxury gated community and is well connected to the Mubarak regime. The film highlights the heavy social reproductive burden shouldered by working-class women like *Nawara*, who does low-paid work looking after her employers, while also undertaking unpaid work caring for her aged grandmother and sick father-in-law. Her efforts are made more difficult by the lack of decent infrastructure—no running water, low quality housing and healthcare, and an inadequate public transportation system. The film may be read not only as an indictment of the Egypt created by the Mubarak regime but also as a critique of the uprising that unseated him, as the film brings into focus the limitations of its promises for a new Egypt. Rather than making life better for people like *Nawara*, as the film's ending demonstrates, the revolution makes life worse.

Women's stories are also the basis for two of the most highly acclaimed Ramadan TV drama series (*mosalsalat, pl.*) in the post-2011 period, both directed by Kamla Abu Zekry and written by Mariam Naoum. *Bent Esmaha Zaat* (*A Girl Called Zaat*, 2013) is based on Sonallah Ibrahim's novel *Zaat*, published in 1992.⁸ Like the book, the series follows *Zaat* over the course of her life, highlighting the difficulties she encounters as a result of patriarchal norms and the gendered effects of Egypt's neoliberal reforms, particularly with reference to the household and social reproduction (Salem 2020). The adaptation of the novel to the post-2011 period shows a more assertive *Zaat* and the series culminates with her participation in the 2011 uprising (*ibid.*), thereby ending on an optimistic note for the future of Egypt and for *Zaat*'s own future. In contrast, *Sign al-Nissa* (*Women's Prison*, 2014), based on a play by the late Fathiyya al-`Assal written in 1993, portrays a sense of hopelessness (Shabrawy 2014). The play is a series of monologues by different female prisoners, highlighting the ways in which different forms of gender oppression as well as other social injustices led to their imprisonment. In this respect, the physical prison is an allegory for the wider society and its restrictions on women (Elsadda 2008: 148). Al-`Assal was herself imprisoned for her political activism under Gamal Abdel-Nasser and Anwar al-Sadat, and the play is based on her experiences. Despite being written more than 20 years before, the play is still relevant to the post-2011 period with its depictions of widespread poverty, deprivation, and social control alongside the ever-present political repression. Like *Nawara*, it represents a social commentary on the failure of the revolution to improve the lives of Egypt's most oppressed citizens. Despite the differences between these two TV drama series, they represent a notable departure from the "feminist developmentalism" typical of 1990s Egyptian TV series, as discussed by Lila Abu-Lughod (2005: 81), in which middle-class paternalism and state officials are cast in television drama as the saviors of "downtrodden" women. Rather, in these post-2011 works, the state and its officials are represented as a major source of women's problems, while women are forced to rely upon themselves, demonstrating enormous resourcefulness and strength.

Reimagining Gender Identities and Gender Norms

⁷ See Hala Khalil, "Nawara (Trailer)," *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/161>

⁸ See Kamla Abu Zekry and Mariam Naoum, "A Girl Called Zaat ('Bent Esmaha Zaat')," *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/52>

Graffiti, which flourished following the fall of Hosni Mubarak, was a major avenue through which gender norms and identities were reimagined in relation to the revolution. In general, the increased visibility of graffiti was a product of a general atmosphere of greater freedom in light of the disappearance of the police and security forces from the streets. Graffiti signaled the reclaiming of public space by Egyptian citizens after decades of dictatorship, during which “public space was largely given over to images of coercive consent and ideological control” (Elias 2014: 4). However, graffiti by women activists and artists was not only an act of reclaiming space from state control but also of re-gendering public space in order to ensure women’s inclusion and gender equality. Toward this end, graffiti initiatives such as Noon El Neswa, the Mona Lisa Brigades, and Women on Walls created positive representations of women in public spaces to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes (El Nabawi 2013).

Sexual harassment and assault emerged as a crucial issue facing women in the post-2011 period and was addressed in many graffiti images. What is significant is that women were not represented as passive victims in relation to sexual violence. For example, in the graffiti “No to sexual harassment,” by Mira Shihadeh, a woman defiantly holds up an aerosol can and sprays repellent on harassers, who fall away.⁹ It is also noteworthy how Samira Ibrahim, a survivor of the so-called “virginity tests,” was celebrated in graffiti images around the streets of Cairo after she raised a court case against the doctor responsible for these violations.¹⁰ Similarly, artists and activists have called attention to the bravery of *sitt al-banat*, the woman filmed, in a video that went viral, as she was beaten up by military police, who dragged her on the ground and stripped her of her abeya to famously reveal her blue bra during the Cabinet sit-in protests of December 2011.¹¹ Graffiti depictions of the woman became ubiquitous around Cairo in the weeks following the incident. In particular, a stencil represented her with a clenched fist of defiance and wearing a gas mask, in reference to the tear gas that protesters regularly faced at the hands of the security forces.¹²

By celebrating the bravery of these women, artists and activists resisted dominant notions of female docility and respectability, which serve to silence survivors of sexual violence and blame them for the attacks perpetrated against them. The case of *sitt al-banat* is a good example of this trend. Rather than expressing outrage for the actions of the military police, mainstream Egyptian media reacted to this incident by blaming the woman for going to protests, asking “why did she go there?” They blamed her for failing to wear anything under her abeya except for underwear. Some even deemed the color of her bra to be a marker of her sexual immorality. Such discourses discredit women’s involvement in political protests. Thus, through the construction of alternative forms of femininity, graffiti representations resignified women’s victimization as resistance to dictatorship and violence at the hands of the security forces and military, thereby upholding women’s right to be part of the political transition, as well as insisting that citizenship rights must include women’s right to bodily integrity (Abouelnaga 2016; Pratt 2013).

⁹ See Mira Shihadeh, “No to Sexual Harassment,” *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/44>

¹⁰ See Unknown Street Artist, “Samira Ibrahim,” *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/85>

¹¹ See Youth Who Love Egypt, “Brutal Egypt Security Force Beat Woman Unconscious,” *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/36>

¹² See Unknown Artist, “Graffiti of ‘Sitt al-banat’,” *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/1>

Popular Culture as a Tool of Feminist Advocacy

Sexual violence was not a new phenomenon in the post-2011 period, but its scale and brutality was particularly shocking. The graffiti image “Circle of Hell,” by Mira Shihadeh,¹³ effectively represents the horrors of mass sexual assault against female protesters in and around Tahrir Square, which greatly increased between 2012 and 2013. What was new in the post-2011 period was the willingness of women survivors of sexual violence to speak out publicly about their experiences. For example, Yasmin El Baramawy,¹⁴ Hania Moheeb, and Aida Kashef,¹⁵ all attacked during demonstrations, recounted details of their assaults in interviews with television, newspapers, and other media in Egypt and beyond (see, among others, Saleh 2013). By speaking out about sexual violence, these women raised awareness about the scale of the problem and directly resisted dominant social norms that stigmatize and silence women who suffer sexual assault.

Artists and writers have used women’s accounts of their experiences to raise awareness and speak publicly about sexual violence, directly challenging social attitudes that construct it as a “private” matter. The critically acclaimed feature documentary *The People’s Girls* (2016), by Tinne van Loon and Colette Ghunim, uses women’s direct accounts of sexual harassment and body camera footage that captures what it is like for a woman to walk down the street in Cairo.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the all-woman band Bent al-Masarwa collects ordinary women’s stories and turns them into song lyrics.¹⁷ The band made their first album in 2015, after meeting at a creative writing workshop organized by the feminist organization Nazra for Feminist Studies. One of the members of Bent al-Masarwa features in *The People’s Girls*. The band travels around Egypt organizing workshops for women, who are encouraged to write about their lives and the issues they face, such as domestic violence, early marriage, female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C), and racism. According to a band member, “We work on documenting life experiences and present them in an artistic form as a way to resist the dominant culture, which perpetuates stereotypes of those communities ... and reinforces masculinity, patriarchy, and other systems of oppression” (Aswat Masriya 2016).

While popular culture has played a key role in raising awareness about sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence, women activists’ efforts have ensured that the issue be placed on the public agenda, ultimately pressuring the government to take it seriously. In June 2014, the penal code was amended to introduce harsh punishments for sexual harassment, while the National Council for Women launched a national action plan to combat

¹³ See Mira Shihadeh, “Circle of Hell,” *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/40>

¹⁴ See Al-Nahar Mubashar, “Yasmin El Baramawy speaks about her experience of being sexually assaulted,” *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/45>

¹⁵ See Lamis Elhadidy, “Episode of Hina al-Asima (Here is the Capital), dedicated to discussing mass sexual assault of women protesters,” *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/212>

¹⁶ See Tinne van Loon and Colette Ghunim, “The People’s Girls (Trailer),” *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/128>

¹⁷ See Bent al-Masarwa, “Harb Kabira (A Big War),” *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/101>

violence against women (NCW 2015). However, popular cultural representations of sexual violence have focused more on publicizing the issue than on exploring its underlying reasons. This has enabled the regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, which has overseen some of the worst human rights violations in Egypt's modern history, to appropriate the issue in ways that do not challenge its authority or the gendered hierarchies at the core of sexual violence.¹⁸ An example of this co-optation was the regime's reaction to an incident of mass sexual assault during El-Sisi's election victory celebrations in May 2014, which was filmed and went viral. The new president announced: "Our honour is being assaulted in the streets. This is unacceptable and we can't allow one more incident like this to happen" (Kingsley 2014), which reduced women's bodily integrity to a matter of national pride. The much-publicized image of El-Sisi bringing a bouquet of red roses to the survivor of the attack and declaring that "We'll get you your rights" (cit. in Mada Masr 2014) also reduced the woman to "an object of love and guardianship," to borrow Marion Iris Young's words (2003: 19). This scene constructed El-Sisi as the woman's male protector, thereby reproducing rather than challenging the relationship of power and subordination that underpins violence against women and gender inequality more broadly.

Conclusion

Since the military coup of July 2013, there has been a systematic closing of the public sphere, which has included widespread restrictions on the use of public space, censorship of all forms of media, and the repression of any voices that do not conform to the regime's narrative. In this context, opportunities for contesting gender norms through popular culture have become much more limited. That is not to say that such initiatives have disappeared. For example, Bent al-Masarwa continues to make music and perform. Other ongoing feminist cultural projects include The BuSSy Project's plays. Modelled on Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, The BuSSy Project began in 2010 as a platform for performing women's stories of violence and discrimination in different cities around Egypt.¹⁹ Nonetheless, these initiatives are contained within semi-public spaces, such as university campuses and foreign cultural centers, or they are forced to comply with the National Council for Women's feminist developmentalist logic, as is the case with the songs by rapper Zap Tharwat.²⁰

It is important, however, not to limit our attention to those popular cultural texts that overtly challenge dominant gender norms and raise feminist issues. More research is needed on the reception of popular culture by female audiences more generally. Women's magazines, romance novels, soap operas, and commercial pop music that appear to reproduce or even celebrate dominant gender norms, identities, and relations may "speak to very real problems

¹⁸ Former army general Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi was elected president in 2014. As army general, he led the military coup against the late president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, and was celebrated by many Egyptians as the country's "savior" from the unpopular rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. See, for example, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/256>

¹⁹ For more information about The BuSSy Project, see: <https://bussy.co/en/>

²⁰ Zap Tharwat is a rapper known for his songs that address social issues facing the youth. The NCW supported his performances that addressed sexual harassment and gender stereotypes in Egypt. See Zap Tharwat ft. Amina Khalil, "Nour," *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/210>, Zap Tharwat and Menna Hussein, "Meen al-Sabab (Whose Fault Is It?)," *Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/items/show/155>

and tensions in women's lives" (Modleski 1982: 14) and help women think through possible solutions or alternative outcomes. Moreover, we should not dismiss the pleasure that these texts can bring to women's lives, which could be understood as a form of resistance in a context of repression, violence, and economic deprivation. As Laleh Khalili argues, pleasure can be considered as "attempts at clawing back an instant of joy from the drudgery of the everyday" (2016: 583).

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Bio

Nicola Pratt is Associate Professor (Reader) of the International Politics of the Middle East, University of Warwick, UK. Her research focuses on feminist and postcolonial approaches to international relations and politics of/in the Middle East, including war, violence, security, governance, activism, rights, and popular culture.